2018

Remembering the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr (January 15, 1929-April 4 ,1968)

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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

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Hate is too great a burden to bear. It injures the hater more than it injures the hated. ~ Coretta Scott King

On April 4, 2018, the nation will pause to remember the life and legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the most charismatic leaders of the modern Civil Rights Movement. A staunch advocate for the rights of African Americans, he used nonviolence and civil disobedience to bring the rights to fruition. Although he and his followers practiced nonviolence, it was violence that silenced his voice. King may be America's most honored political figure, commemorated in statues, celebrations, and street names throughout the globe. On the fiftieth anniversary of his assassination, the man who believed that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" is as acknowledged through public awareness as ever.

Born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, to Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. (1899–1984) and Alberta Williams King (1904–1974, the younger King was introduced to the African-American social gospel tradition by his father and grandfather, both of whom pastored at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church and were affiliated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). King's father also led campaigns against racial discrimination that would later become a model for his son's political engagement. Despite his family's history of political and social activism, and King's apparent grooming for a similar life, as a teenager he was hesitant to pick up that mantle. That changed when he entered Atlanta's Morehouse College in 1944. King found new spiritual advisors in Morehouse president Benjamin E. Hays and religion professor George Kelsey, who encouraged him to view Christianity as a force for positive social change. King described his decision to enter the ministry as a response to an "inner urge" calling him to "serve humanity."

King's ordination took place during his last semester at Morehouse, and during his senior year, he was already traversing the path of political activism. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from Morehouse College in 1948 and a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1951 from Crozer Theological Seminary, King entered Boston University's School of Theology. Two years later he married Coretta Scott, who was studying music at the New England Conservatory of Music. In 1954 he accepted the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., a year before receiving his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology.

In December 1955, African American leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to protest the arrest of NAACP secretary Rosa Parks for refusing to render her bus seat to a white man. The MIA selected Dr. King to head the new group. As principal spokesperson of the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott, King devised a protest strategy that included the recruitment and mobilization of African American churches. After the Supreme Court overturned Alabama's bus segregation laws in *Browder v. Gayle* (1956), King, C. K. Steele, Fred Shuttlesworth, and T.J. Jemison established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As president, King coordinated the struggle for civil rights throughout the South. His 1958 publication of *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* aided in catapulting him to the position of a national civil rights leader. Although he was busy writing, speaking, and gaining insights into the philosophy of nonviolence for the betterment of the movement's goals and objectives, during the late 1950s, the SCLC's lack of success made the movement appear relatively dormant. A 1959 trip to India also led King to become a staunch advocate of Mohandas Gandhi's nonviolence ethos, which he combined with the concepts of a Christian social gospel.

The southern civil rights movement gained new energy from the student-led lunch counter sit-in movement that caught the nation's attention on February 1, 1960, when the "Greensboro Four" from North Carolina A & T State University sat-in at the racially segregated Woolworth's lunch counter. Their action ignited the sit-in movement that spread throughout the South during 1960. The sit-ins brought into existence a new protest group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). King's interaction with students, especially Nashville's James Bevel, Diane J. Nash, and John Lewis—whom Rev. James Lawson taught the philosophy and tactics of direct nonviolent protest tactics—often pushed King toward a greater assertiveness and militancy. In May of 1961, students under the leadership of Nash, Lewis, and others

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Photo of Dr. King at Fisk University on May 3, 1964 courtesy of Harold Lowe Jr./ *The Tennessean.*

continued the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Freedom Rides in Mississippi. Between 1961 and 1962, King's strategic differences with SNCC activists became apparent during the protest movement in Albany, Georgia. Arrested twice during the Albany protests, when King left jail and subsequently left Albany without attaining a successful victory, some activists questioned his leadership within the southern protest movement.

By 1963, King had reaffirmed his prominence within the movement through his leadership of the Birmingham campaign, where the most massive protests to date were taking place. The brutality of Birmingham officials and Alabama's governor George C. Wallace's refusal to allow the admission of black students at the University of Alabama motivated President Kennedy to introduce major civil rights legislation. In August, King's address at the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom* was the culmination of a wave of civil rights protest activity that extended to northern cities. In his *I Have a Dream* speech, King told America that its African American citizens came to Washington to "cash a check. . .that will give us on demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice." Less than a month later shock waves moved through the movement and the nation as dynamite blasted Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Carol Denise McNair. The Reverend Dr. King preached three of the girls' funerals. King was named Time magazine's 1963 "Man of the Year" in its January 1964 issue, becoming the first African American recipient of this honor.

On March 7, 1965, state police under orders from Governor George Wallace, confronted protesters with tear gas and clubs, stopping a march from Selma to Montgomery and forcing them back across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Following the marches on March 7 and 9, King postponed the Selma to Montgomery march until he received court approval. After receiving such, thousands of black and white civil rights sympathizers from across the country joined the voting rights march. On March 25, King addressed the protesters from the steps of the capitol in Montgomery, and on August 6, the 89th U. S. Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In December 1967 King announced the Poor People's Campaign, a crusade designed to improve government antipoverty efforts. This effort was in its early stages when James Lawson asked King to come to Memphis, Tenn. on behalf of sanitation workers striking against unfair treatment and wages. On March 28, 1968 King led thousands of sanitation workers and sympathizers on a march through downtown Memphis. He returned to Memphis for the last time in early April 1968. Addressing an audience at Bishop Charles J. Mason Temple on April 3rd, King seemed hopeful in the face of the "difficult days" that lay ahead. He asserted "But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop [and] I've seen the Promised Land." Continuing in the cadence of a Baptist preacher, he declared, "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." The following evening while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, James Earl Ray forever silenced the voice of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with a single bullet. Four days later, an estimated 42,000 people led by Coretta Scott King, SCLC, and union leaders silently marched through Memphis in honor of King and demanded that Mayor Henry Loeb III give in to the union's requests. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) pledged support for the workers until "we have justice".

Dr. King remained unwavering in his resolve to revolutionize the American social order through nonviolent activism until his death. He was one of the most identifiable leaders of the modern Civil Rights Movement, yet fifty years after his assassination, many do not recognize that King's radicalism underscored his revolutionary vision, his unapologetic opposition to the Vietnam War, and his crusade against global imperialism. In his 1969 posthumously published essay, "A Testament of Hope", King averred that "White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society". The "black revolution" was more than a civil rights movement, he insisted. "It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws— racism, poverty, militarism and materialism."

-- Linda T. Wynn

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